

Complete the 1852-2001 Transition in Jackson County Government

Archaic Structure

The LWVA and LWVRV are looking into the possibility of proposing two changes to the Jackson County Charter. The charter is substantially the same as it was when the Oregon Legislature wrote it in 1852--when county government only dealt with roads, law enforcement, courts, tax collection and care of the needy. Since then, there has been terrific growth both in county population and in the complexity of county services (adding such services as mental health, juvenile and senior services, land-use, economic development, airports, urban renewal, insect and dog control, etc., etc.)--far beyond anything imagined by the 1852 legislators. In addition, county government now carries out many policies determined by the state and federal legislatures.

County Manager Government

In 1944 the Oregon Legislature decided, because of the increased magnitude and complexity of county government, that counties should have the right to adopt a county manager form of government. So, like several of the larger counties, Jackson county established the position of county administrator. But thus far changes have not been made in the numbers or duties of the board of commissioners.

Accountability & Efficiency

Although the county established, and has for several years staffed, a professional county administrator position capable of professional practices and procedures to effectively implement county policies, and to control the human, material and informational resources needed to do that, the charter still says that the commissioners are the county administrators. The expertise of the commissioners lies elsewhere. Dispersing administrative authority and accountability among 4 administrators so fragments management as to make it inefficient, confusing, and difficult to implement the results of planning and budgeting. And who is to be held accountable for resulting inefficiencies and distortions of programs?

Commissioner Expertise

As makers of policy and legislation, the expertise of commissioners is the ability to effectively represent the interests, concerns and equities of their constituents--knowing how tax levels, services, ordinances, projects and programs impact those constituents. In addition to handling constituent complaints, they oversee county administration, review and evaluate organizational performance, and hire and fire the county administrator. It's time to affirm the separation of the making and administering of policy and legislation.

Improved Representation

There are at least two reasons to consider expanding the number of commissioners: to provide a larger number and diversity of points of contact for citizen input, and to increase the number and diversity of points of view in deliberations. Expanding the board from 3 to 5 or 7 not only makes it easier to contact a commissioner, it also increases the chances that voters will be able to communicate with a commissioner empathic with their concerns.

Improved Deliberation

The second value of an increase is to improve commissioner deliberation. It's obvious that better decisions are rendered when more points of view are represented. Less obvious is the limitation on discussion posed by "the sunshine law" that states that any discussion in a quorum must be "noticed" and held in public. That means, with the current 3-person board, since 2 commissioners constitute a quorum, there can be no discussion or deliberation of public issues outside of public meetings. That is an unacceptable limitation of discussion of county issues. A further drag on commissioner deliberation is the difficulty of presenting "a minority position." Being in the minority on an issue is much more difficult, interpersonally, when it's 2:1 than when it's 3:2 or 4:3. The Leagues feel it's time to increase the number of commissioners.

It's time to complete the transition from 1852 to 2001 in county government!